

BIRD NOTES FROM LA JOYA DE SALAS, TAMAULIPAS

BY C. RICHARD ROBINS AND WILLIAM B. HEED¹

THE mountain village of La Joya de Salas, Tamaulipas, is about 65 kilometers south-southwest of Ciudad Victoria, 25 kilometers south-southeast of Jaumave, 50 kilometers east-northeast of Tula, and 20 kilometers northwest of Gómez Farías. It is built around a small sink-hole lake in the center of a roughly circular valley five to seven miles across.

The valley, except for the sloping eastern part, is very flat. Its elevation probably is about 5200 to 5400 feet. Along the north, east and southeast edges small ridges and ravines lead radially to mountains which rise sharply to an elevation of at least 6500 feet (possibly considerably more). At the west rises West Mountain. At the south is a deep canyon whose bottom is about a thousand feet lower than the valley floor. Immediately beyond this canyon rise slopes as high as those to the north so that, in effect, La Joya valley is completely ringed by mountains.

Trails lead out from the valley in several directions—well defined ones to Jaumave, Tula and Gómez Farías, smaller ones to lesser villages closer by. The Gómez Farías trail leads eastward over the only ridge separating the valley from the Río Sabinas lowlands and the great coastal plain. From this trail a good side-trail leads down to Pano Ayuctle and the busy Laredo-to-Mexico City highway. The character and birdlife of the country about Gómez Farías and Pano Ayuctle already have been reported on by Sutton and Pettigill (1942. *Auk*, 59: 1–34) and Eaton and Edwards (1948. *Wilson Bulletin*, 60: 109–114).

A humid deciduous forest which has been called a 'cloud forest,' covers much of the east side of this ridge. Forest of the same sort grows in some of the ravines running out from La Joya valley. The presence of these wooded pockets and the nearness of the main 'cloud forest' explain the occasional appearance of the Crested Guan or *Ajol* (*Penelope purpurascens*), Singing Quail (*Dactylortyx thoracicus*), Ornate Eagle-Hawk (*Spizaetus ornatus*), Bell's Warbler (*Basileuterus belli*), and Rufous-capped Atlapetes (*Atlapetes pileatus*) along the east side of the valley. All of these birds are common in the forest above Pano Ayuctle and Gómez Farías.

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The eastern part of La Joya valley is fairly well forested with pines and moss-draped oaks. Most of the valley is, however, open and grazed to the ground, the barren monotony being relieved only by an occasional rocky outcrop or small, thorny tree. The country beyond West Mountain appears to be decidedly montane and arid. The slopes are open and rocky, with a scattering of agave and yucca, and patches of forest, presumably oak and pine. This region, the eastern edge of the great central plateau, is separated from La Joya valley, West Mountain, and, indeed, the entire Guatemalan Range of the Sierra Madre Oriental, by a large canyon. That birds we presume to be more common in this arid country to the west occasionally reach La Joya valley is indicated by the following sight records (all made by us in 1949): a group of four Say's Phoebes (*Sayornis saya*), March 25-27; a mixed flock of Bush-tits (*Psaltiriparus minimus*) and Verdins (*Auriparus flaviceps*), March 24; a Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*), March 24; and five Phainopeplas (*Phainopepla nitens*), May 24.

The mountains north of La Joya valley we did not investigate. Their nature is not known to us.

One more area needs to be discussed: West Mountain. The crown of this mountain was, except for a few grassy meadows, densely covered with oak-scrub knee- to waist-high except about the numerous sink-holes, where it reached 10 feet. The meadows were surrounded by aspens, cedar, and a bush resembling English boxwood. Below the very top of the mountain were depressions—each an acre or so in extent—in which grew larger oaks. These trees sometimes reached a height of 30 feet, and they were covered heavily with Spanish moss and lichens, less heavily with bromeliads and orchids. These 'oak depressions' were very different from the surrounding scrublands. On entering them we sensed the shade and a certain dampness of vegetation, soil and atmosphere. They harbored a rich avifauna. Many of the birds listed by us we encountered only in them.

In 1949 we visited La Joya from March 23 to 29 and from May 24 to 30, listing 129 bird species and collecting 82 specimens (now in the Sutton collection). Heed and Byron C. Harrell visited the valley from the evening of June 25 to the morning of June 28, collecting four specimens and adding one species to the list. (In 1948, Ernest P. Edwards, Paul S. Martin, and Roger Hurd had visited La Joya from April 11 to 14. They had collected 26 specimens and recorded two species not on our list.)

No rain fell during our March visit in 1949, and the sky was almost cloudless. Not for months had there been an appreciable shower and the lake was critically low. Because of the drouth no one had planted crops. Temperatures were, however, moderate, ranging from lows at night of 55°-60°F., to highs of about 75° in the afternoon. Between our March and May visits rain fell several times and in late May we had thunder showers. From May 24 to 30 the temperature ranged from lows of 60°-72° in the morning to highs of 71°-80° in the

afternoon. During Heed's and Harrell's visit in latter June the weather was continuously overcast and rainy.

Our La Joya list is largely of the breeding birds. The following forms seem to merit special discussion at this time:

Columba f. fasciata. Band-tailed Pigeon.

First noted May 25, when Heed collected a female, one of two birds seen near the village. On May 28, Robins found a nest (contents ?) in a large oak near a meadow on the top of West Mountain. An adult bird was on this nest, which was 20 feet up, well out on a side limb, and made of twigs, apparently, being like that of a Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*) but much bulkier. We saw hundreds of Band-tailed Pigeons along the trail between the mountain top and the village.

Rhynchopsitta terrisi. Maroon-fronted Parrot.

With George M. Sutton and Roger Hurd we made an attempt to find this species in the pines above Frank Harrison's farm, the Rancho del Cielo (between La Joya valley and Gómez Farías), on March 21, 1949. We heard the birds in the distance, but never saw them. This failure was really what prompted us to go to La Joya, for these *papagayos* were said to be common there from October to April (roughly the dry season). We heard a flock as we were climbing to La Joya on March 23, and later that day saw four flying high over the ridge east of the valley. On March 27, Robins saw a flock (50 to 100 birds) alight just out of range above him along the rim of a canyon. They were feeding on pine cones. They continued to fly back and forth over the canyon into the pines on either side. At a distance they sounded exactly like a noisy company of Acorn Woodpeckers (*Balanosphyra formicivora*), a species which breeds commonly in the region. They resembled Thick-billed Parrots (*R. pachyrhyncha*), but the red at the base of the bill was so deep (cf. Moore, R. T. 1947. *Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington*, 60: 27-28) that in the field it appeared to be black.

Irby Davis has commented that species of the genus *Rhynchopsitta* might properly be called macawlets. *R. terrisi* has not, so far as we know, been reported heretofore from Tamaulipas. We have no proof that it breeds near La Joya and suspect that it does not.

Hylocharis l. leucotis. White-eared Hummingbird.

On May 25 we found a nest (contents ?) of this species high on West Mountain. It was about 30 feet up in an oak, well out from the main trunk, on a twig which stuck straight down from a large horizontal branch. It was made of lichens, small bits of Spanish moss, and other plant materials, bound together with spider webs. An adult bird was on it. We would probably never have found it had we not noted the aggressive behavior of a White-eared Hummingbird which seemed to be driving all hummingbirds away from the nest-tree, returning at intervals to perch near the nest. A male specimen collected by Robins on May 27 has the measurements (wing, 55 mm.; culmen, 16) of the nominate race.

Atthis h. heloisa. Heloise's Bumblebee Hummingbird.

White-eared Hummingbirds occasionally visited flower gardens in the village of La Joya, but we found the Bumblebee Hummingbird only in the oak pockets on West Mountain. Here we saw it repeatedly May 24 to 30 and June 27. On May 27 and 28, Robins witnessed copulation several times. In each instance, the female was perched on a low bush, with her wings drooping at her sides. The male, hovering about five feet above her, moved toward her slowly. In his descent his wings appeared to beat at full speed, but as he drew close the pitch of his drone became markedly higher, as if a more rapid and less deep wing-beat were necessary to keep him from striking her. Not even momentarily did his wings stop their beating. The usual drone

of the wings is rather high-pitched and beelike and carries a considerable distance. We could identify the birds not alone by the sound of their flight but by their custom of flying along the under side of the main oak branches. Here, with wings going full speed, they moved at a rate of a few feet per second, apparently hunting food among the lichens. Occasionally a White-eared Hummingbird fed in this way, but that species seemed to prefer probing the bromeliads. The 'song' of *Atthis heloisa* was an insectlike *zee, eeee, eeee*, each syllable rising in volume and pitch at the end. In the two specimens collected (males, May 27 and 28) the outermost primary is decidedly attenuate, and the bills measure, respectively, 12 and 12.5 mm.

Trogon m. mexicanus. Mexican Trogon.

Fairly common in wooded ravines. On May 27, at about 6000 feet on West Mountain, Robins found a nest four feet from the ground in a hole in the main trunk of a small oak. The entrance measured 4 x 2½ inches and the cavity was about an inch deep, so the two recently hatched young were readily visible. An adult male specimen (testes enlarged) collected March 27 is brassy green above, especially on the back, and not at all "blue or purplish" as Griscom (1932. *Proc. New England Zool. Club*, 13: 57) seemed to believe Tamaulipan birds to be.

Piculus aeruginosus. Bronzed Woodpecker.

We saw this species March 27 and 28—a single bird on each date. In May it seemed to be fairly common throughout the deciduous woodland. Robins collected a young bird (not long out of the nest, but by itself) on May 25. A little later that day he saw a family group, including three young of about the same age as the bird collected. The wide altitudinal range of this species, which has been reported only from Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, Puebla, and northern Veracruz, is surprising.

Myiarchus tuberculifer. Dusky-capped Flycatcher.

We found this species in woodland wherever we went except near the village of La Joya. On June 27, Heed found a pair feeding young in a natural cavity in an oak about twenty feet from the ground.

Empidonax difficilis. Western Flycatcher.

Common all over West Mountain. During our May visit the birds were in pairs, and so strong was their attachment to the sink-holes in which they nested that we could easily locate the sink-holes merely by listening for the characteristic callnotes.

Catherpes m. mexicanus. Canyon Wren.

Common along the stone fences as well as about cliffs and scattered rocks. On May 26, in a small cave above the valley, we found a pair feeding young. On May 27, again in a cave, we found a nest containing four young almost ready to leave. We collected two adult males and a nestling, May 25-27.

Catharus aurantiirostris clarus. Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush.

This bird we did not see at all in March, but in May it was the commonest species on West Mountain, especially in the oak-scrub. Although in almost constant song, it was difficult to observe because of its extreme shyness. The song, never loud, reminded us of a weak song of the Hermit Thrush (*Hylocichla guttata*). Among its various callnotes was a thin *me-aah*, reminiscent of a cry of the Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*); a nasal *ber-wink*; and a high squeal, audible only at close range and given near the nest.

We found ten nests, all in oaks, two to fifteen feet above the ground, on West Mountain. Six were empty, apparently just ready for eggs. One held two eggs, another three eggs (May 28), and two more probably held eggs, for a bird was sitting on each. The eggs were light green or blue-green, rather evenly spotted or blotched with lavender. The highest nests (one 12 feet up; two 15 feet up) were on sloping branches in about the sort of site a Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla ustulata*) might select. Three nests were largely of lichens, others of leaves, and all had some pine needles and moss in them.

So far as we know *C. aurantirostris* has not before been recorded in Tamaulipas. Our three specimens (May 27-28), all males, have the pale gray under parts and not very rufescent upper parts of *clarus*.



Nest of Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush (*Catharus aurantirostris*) three feet above ground in scrub oak at about 6000 feet elevation above the village of La Joya de Salas, Tamaulipas, México. Photographed May 28, 1949, by William B. Heed.

Ptilogonys cinereus pallescens. Gray Silky-Flycatcher.

Not seen in March, but abundant in May on the steep hillsides, especially where weathering had bared the limestone or worn it into steplike cliffs. The birds perched on dead snags or the very tops of shrubs, darting out after insects. Their call was a hurried *chu-chup*, or a more slowly given *chup, chup, chup*. Infrequently they gave a lisping cry like that of a Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*). On May 27, several of them were carrying nest material and we found one nest—a neat, compact structure about twenty feet up on a small outer oak branch. We found several more nests on May 28 on West Mountain. Egg-laying apparently had not yet started on that date. All the nests were lichen-covered, like that described by Newman (1950. *Condor*, 52: 157-158). A male and two females collected May 26 appear to represent the not very strongly marked race *pallescens*.

Cyclarhis gujanensis. Rufous-browed Pepper-Shrike.

This species has been called a "humid forest" bird by Eaton and Edwards (1948. *Wilson Bulletin*, 60: 111), but it certainly is not restricted to the humid forest about the Rancho del Cielo or above the Río Sabinas, and it may possibly not breed there at all. We observed a singing bird well up on West Mountain in brushy, distinctly arid country. Twice we saw this bird carrying food, but when we tried to follow it to its nest we lost it among the large flocks of Abeillé's Grosbeaks (*Hesperiphona abeillei*) and numerous Gray Silky-Flycatchers.

Geothlypis nelsoni. Hooded Yellow-throat.

This shy warbler we first encountered on May 27 in the low oak-scrub on West Mountain. Here it was fairly common, though we did not find a nest. The males sang from the tops of the small oaks. The song was a distinctive *wichy wichy wichy chee chee chee chee wich* or *wichy wichy wichy bitsy bitsy bitsy brrrrr* (trilled). The note of alarm was a sharp *chip*. Occasionally one rose in air some 20 feet and gave a longer version of one of the above songs. In flight the tail appeared to be very long. Three males taken (two, May 27; one, June 27) vary considerably, one of them having no gray at all on the crown. This species has not heretofore been reported from Tamaulipas.

Tanagra e. elegantissima. Blue-hooded Euphonia.

Uncommon in March. In May abundant on the oak-covered slopes down to the very edge of the valley. It fed exclusively on mistletoe, which was common everywhere in the oaks. The males sang their loud, bubbling songs in the tops of the highest trees.

We found several nests in May—the first among the heavy leafage of a branch which had fallen from the top of an oak and lodged about 20 feet from the ground. The birds had bound the dead leaves together loosely with Spanish moss, placing the nest inside. Our climbing to this nest so disturbed the birds that they abandoned it and started another in a clump of Spanish moss in the same tree. Three other nests were all in Spanish moss. A small entrance hole led in through the moss to the nest proper, which was made of plant fibers, pine needles, and some moss. No nest examined by us held eggs, but a female taken May 26 had a well defined brood-patch and four ruptured ovarian follicles, and a female taken May 29 had a well defined brood-patch. The four males and three females collected (March and May) represent the nominate race. The females are readily identifiable as *elegantissima* because of the bright yellowish-olive tone of their under parts.

Piranga flava dextra. Hepatic Tanager.

Fairly common in higher woods. A nest, apparently just ready for eggs, we found May 28 in an oak seven feet from the ground on the top of West Mountain. It was made of plant fibers and grasses principally, with a few twigs. We collected a stub-tailed male in juvenal plumage on May 30. Three adult specimens (female, March 24; male and female, March 28) collected by Robins we have identified as *dextra*.

Phœucticus melanocephalus. Black-headed Grosbeak.

Not seen in March, but recorded often in May. Heed found a nest (three eggs) in a mesquite-like tree on a steep, brush-covered slope above the valley on May 27. The measurements (wing, 101 mm.; tail, 80; culmen, 20) of our only specimen, a male, seem to indicate intermediacy between the nominate race and *maculatus*.

Tiaris olivacea. Yellow-faced Grassquit.

To our great surprise we found this species nesting along the edges of the oak pockets at about 6300 feet elevation on West Mountain. We saw several adults on May 27 and 28,



Entrance to nest of Blue-hooded Euphonia (*Tanagra elegantissima*) in Spanish moss in an oak, fifteen feet above ground, at an elevation of about 5000 feet, near the village of La Joya de Salas, Tamaulipas, México. Photographed May 26, 1949, by William B. Heed.

one of them carrying food. We heard a young one being fed, too, but failed to find it or the nest. This species breeds rather commonly in the Río Sabinas bottomlands and along the edges of the marshes at Tampico.

Aimophila r. rufescens. Rusty Sparrow.

Heed collected one of several singing males encountered on West Mountain among oak-scrub at about 6000 feet elevation on June 27, 1949. The wing of this specimen measures 75 mm., the tail, 80. The species has not, apparently, been reported heretofore from Tamaulipas.

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NEW LIFE MEMBER



Ralph Milton Edeburn was born on a farm in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, on January 4, 1905. He received his B. S. degree from the State Teachers' College at Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, and both his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from Cornell. After teaching in high school for a number of years he accepted a position in the Zoology Department of Marshall College, where he now holds an Associate Professorship. He has always been interested in classroom teaching, and has devoted most of his energies to that work. He is the co-author of a laboratory manual in general Zoology for college students. His profession is pre-medical education. His interest in birds was fired many years ago by a student, and he has spent much time since collecting data on the birds of the local communities in which he has taught. At present he is particularly interested in the Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) and its nesting

behavior at Huntington, West Virginia. He is president of the active Huntington Bird Study Club and an associate member of the American Ornithologists' Union. He joined The Wilson Ornithological Club in 1947. He is now the Chairman of our Membership Committee. Our photo shows him holding a magpie collected by him near Huntington.